Carleton College’s Personal and Professional Impact
George H. Davis, June 9, 2012

President Poskanzer, Professor Savina, Trustees, Faculty and Staff, and Carleton College Graduating Class of 2012.

This honor is about the transformative power of a liberal arts education, and the transformative dimensions of deep friendships rooted in college and ‘attended to’ through life.

My immersion in the liberal arts started with my undergraduate years at The College of Wooster in Ohio. Back in the early Pleistocene (that would be 1960) I entered The College of Wooster as a freshman. The person I would marry, Merrily Siepert, entered the very next year. Certain faculty at Wooster were the embodiment of broad and generous learning, but President Lowry was the architect. After I became an assistant professor at The University of Arizona I began reading everything I could lay my hands on that Lowry wrote. Decades before the financial collapse of 2008, the freshman year of these graduating seniors, Lowry warned of “the endless goading of men and women into purchases they cannot afford to make.” On another occasion he referred to a coin-fed hobby horse that you could ride off into the sunset without ever leaving a grocery store. He said: “It is a haunting symbol – this imitation rider on the imitation horse: making all the safe motions and going nowhere.” Lowry, through his writing, implored me (I felt he was talking to me, personally) to consider myself an apprentice throughout life in my teaching, in my research, in my outreach, in my living life. He would want each of you to hang on to the passion for your chosen field, to keep your curiosity ‘amped up,’ to strive toward deep learning and discovery, and to embrace that certain brand of humility that derives from knowing that the complexity of nature will outrun even our keenest minds and highest levels of our competence. That’s what Lowry wrote! My mom always helped me with the humility part. If she were alive, and I called her at this very moment on my cell phone, and I told her what was happening this morning, she would say: “Sometimes it makes me humble when I think how great I am.” It was her teasing way of trying to make sure that any one of her 3 sons didn’t say something really stupid!

Wooster’s Howard Lowry and Carleton’s 4th President, Laurence McKinley Gould, were cut from the same cloth, though Lowry never carried out a 1500-mile dog sledge journey across Antarctic ice fields to the Queen Maud Mountains to look for fossilized *Glossopteris* flora (Permian in age), one of smoking guns proving that South America, Africa, Australia, and Antarctica were all once part of the Gondwana supercontinent. I never really held a conversation with Howard Lowry, but Larry Gould showed up in my life as mentor, colleague, friend, and personification of liberal arts vision. He impacted me personally. Now how did this happen? Lowry and Gould knew one another. At Wooster, following my
sophomore year, Dr. Lowry conferred upon Dr. Gould an honorary degree. This occurred fifty years ago, almost to the day, just after Dr. Gould had retired from his Presidency, here. It was Larry’s 19th honorary degree; he would receive 32! Within the speeches given that morning we read a fusion of the core values of a Wooster and a Carleton. Just 2 weeks later, Newsweek ran an article describing the fact that Dr. Gould had been recruited to The University of Arizona. “Gould is uncertain about his future at The University of Arizona. They’re taking me on temporarily for the spring semester. If I work out, perhaps they’ll put me on permanently in the fall.”

It worked out! Larry’s one-year stint in Tucson soon expanded to more than 30 years. He died in 1995 at age 99, nearly 70 years after he had explored Antarctica as Second in Command of the Byrd Expedition. Larry Gould helped pave the way for serious science at The University of Arizona. My C.V. shows that I was among the direct beneficiaries. Larry emphasized to me, and to the department, “Good is the enemy of excellent.” Larry witnessed the advances, but I’m not sure that even he could have imagined that The National Science Foundation now ranks The University of Arizona #1 among all public and private institutions in the physical sciences; or that U.S. News and World Report now ranks the graduate program in geology at The University of Arizona #1 in the nation. (Of course, I never believed in U.S. News and World Report rankings until this particular ranking hit the streets). Incidentally, we would not have made it to this #1 ranking had it not been for the Carleton-Arizona geology pipeline, including such notables as Clark Arnold, Elizabeth Youngblood Anthony, Christine Smith Siddoway, Dave Barbeau, Eric Jensen, Reed Krider, Carrie Morrill, Ofori Pearson, Karen Swanberg, Megan Anderson, Willie Guenthner, Kendra Murray, Matt Dettinger, Nate Evenson, and one of my present department colleagues, Pete Reiners.

Yes, a liberal arts education has meant the world to me. It made me a better Provost of a comprehensive public university, with its 18 colleges, 120 departments, and a budget approaching $1.5 billion. What helped me carry the load is written bold-faced, for you, on Carleton’s Homepage: “The most important thing our students learn is how to learn for a lifetime. Critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, effective communication: these are the tools that transform a collection of facts and figures into a way of understanding the world,” …or understanding a university. At no time in my life have I read more broadly than I did in the 7 years while provost, …not reading books on “How to Be a Provost?,” but biographies, novels, nonfiction, poetry, …all the things that feed and nourish when engaged in big tasks in uncertain environments. Who would have imagined that Seamus Heaney’s translation of Beowulf would illuminate for me the post 911 retreat of the American public indoors, away from public places?

I mentioned at the start that a second transformative dimension is deep friendships, rooted early, attended to through life. The graduating seniors palpably know what I’m talking about, for key friendships have now taken root for
you, and will hold even though you are heading off in 500 different directions. Facebook alone will not be sufficient in attending to them. It requires investing through life, keeping priorities intact, scheduling time together, traveling together. Apropos to this morning is the lifelong friendship Merrily and I held with Shelby and Jean Boardman. Shelby finished his PhD at The University of Michigan and landed a job at Carleton in 1971. He became a wonderful teacher, advisor, and leader, was eventually named the Charles L. Denison Professor of Geology, and served Carleton as Dean from 2002 to 2005. His life was cut short in 2007, and within a year his wife Jeanie also died. One epitaph regarding Jeanie is particularly apt: “She was energized by enriching the lives of others.”

Of all things, Merrily and I are in possession of an archeological record that presages the start of this friendship, in the form of a letter that my wife, Merrily, wrote to my mom. “George just made his first trip down to the geology building, and he met a girl named Jean Boardman. Jean said that her husband, Shelby, is also starting grad school. George thinks that we all are going to be good friends.” What an understatement!! We became fast friends for life. Over time and during memorable trips together, we seemed to be in conversations just at the right moments. We celebrated the good things, pondered the complex things, and supported one another in the most challenging times. It was Shelby who introduced me to Carleton’s extraordinary geology faculty-staff ‘family,’ which for me stands as the aspirational standard for working tirelessly and creatively on behalf of students. Through Shelby I felt in some small way a part of the Carleton geology family, connecting closely with Eiler Henrickson, Ed Buchwald, Tim Vick, Mary Savina, Clint Cowan, Bereket Haileab, Cam Davidson, Sarah Titus, and Dave Bice. Shelby and Carleton geology colleagues provided the tonic I needed when I was recovering from a university presidency that didn’t go as I had dreamed and imagined, inviting me here to serve as a Benedict Visiting Professor, where I became immersed in students, teaching, and field trips in snow in September.

Yogi Berra is credited with saying, “if you don't know where you’re going, you'll end up some place else.” I say, “even if you think you know where you’re going, your liberal arts education will take you to unexpected places.” I’m at such a place in my life this morning. I sense Jean and Merrily sitting next to one another, and I feel Larry and Shelby by my side. I’m again part of a liberal arts college and I am grateful.